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ABSTRACT

Three interdependent components--content, context, and methodology--are discussed as they relate to the teaching of African languages to non-native speakers. Content depends on type and availability of instructional materials, which may be quite limited. If textbooks are not available, the teacher must select from varied authentic materials and graded stories. Absence of graded materials such as textbooks requires that the teacher be trained in or familiar with learner-oriented teaching strategies, and has the disadvantage that learners can not preview and review materials from the same source. Establishment of content goals facilitates lesson planning. Dictionaries may be scarce, and materials should include a simple, relevant glossary. Social and cultural contexts of the content used are important elements in effective teaching of grammar, because they may be unfamiliar to the learner. Role-playing can be used to establish context. Successful classroom language teaching addresses individual learners' needs and balances competence and performance. Class preparation should include an outline of areas to be covered, detailed notes on subject matter, and a list of lesson-related activities. The lesson plan should be flexible, and incorporate these stages: familiarization; review of old material; introduction of new material; group practice; and reinforcement. (MSE)

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The Teaching of African Languages: Content, Context, and Methodology

Lioba Moshi

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PENN Language News

Spring 1994 University of Pennsylvania Number Nine

The Teaching of African Languages

Content, Context and Methodology

by Lioba Moshi

My experience in teaching African languages to non-native speakers has made me aware of the fact that language teaching requires much skill and many hours of preparation, regardless of the number of years of second language teaching experience. This is because the way one teaches is greatly influenced by what is being taught and the contexts in which the teaching is taking place. In other words, the teaching of a language involves three interdependent components: CONTENT, CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY. Because these components have not and cannot be rendered static, the business of language teaching requires that the language teacher reviews his or her teaching periodically to ensure that the content, context and methodology adopted reflect current trends in the language.

Many teachers of African languages, like myself, have been faced with the challenges resulting from periodic changes in the languages according to the speaker's social and political ideologies as well as economic developments. Both teachers and authors of textbooks are faced with the challenge of keeping up with the rise of new terminologies and expressions. In addition, textbook authors are aware of the fact that in order to avoid frequent revisions of their textbooks, they must select contexts that are not rigid and situation-specific. Instead, the text must be general enough to allow the introduction of new situations that result from social, political or economic change. For example, a chapter in a textbook that discusses leadership and government structure will be considered rigid and specific if the context is restricted to the political structure of the time at which the text was written. Changes on the political scene are unpredictable in many African nations and such a context can render the textbook inappropriate within a short period.

On the social scene, a rigid context will be one that involves cultural values. The ideal context will be one that successfully exploits those cultural situations that form the foundations of the cultural and social values rather than the current mainstream cultural and social values that are easily changed by outside influences[1]. Faced with these challenges, teachers of African languages must be aware of the interdependence between content, context and methodology.

1. CONTENT

Content depends on the type and availability of teaching material. Unlike the commonly taught languages (CTL) but like most less commonly taught languages (LCTL)[2], African languages are ill-equipped with suitable teaching material. This is more of a

continued on page 3

Contents

The Teaching of African Languages, *by Lioba Moshi* 1

Center for the Advancement of Language Learning, *by Betty A. Kilgore* 9

Renaissance of the Chinese Languages, *by William C. Hannas and Joshua D. Edelstein* 10

Conference on Medieval Vernacular Sinitic, *by Liang Min-min and Sara Davis* 14

Romipen and the Romani Language: Their Changing Status, *by Milena Hübschmannová* 20

Everyday Ukrainian (book review), *by Leonid Rudnytzky* 24

The Teaching of African Languages

continued from page 1

historical factor (Wiley & Dwyer 1980) than a reflection of the overall development of the field[3]. For some languages, in particular Swahili, the field has been enriched by initiatives and innovations from teachers who have taken time to compile their own teaching materials that are characteristic of their local conditions[4]. These efforts have been encouraged by the demands for the language. The demand has also given rise to varied textual materials whose content and contexts depend largely on the author's selection which is often influenced by a teacher-oriented teaching style. In some cases, the materials are periodically revised or are freshly compiled each year[5]. There are hidden advantages to such materials that are periodically revised or freshly compiled. The content and context remain current to the trends in the society and more closely reflect the present state of the changes in the language use. The main sources of such material include newspapers, graded stories, videos, slides, posters and photographs. These are ideal resources since they emphasize authenticity and cultural values. They also reflect current social, cultural, political and economic trends in the society. However, there is one major drawback, namely a lack of a systematic sequence.

In the absence of systematic textual teaching materials (i.e. a textbook), the sequencing of the material depends entirely on the teacher. The recommendation put forth by scholars in the field of African language instruction is that such a teacher be a trained linguist or someone who has considerable experience in working with such a diverse source of material. Linguistic expertise is crucial in the selection and sequence of the linguistic features necessary in teaching the sound system, the morphological structure, the syntax and the context-bound semantic and pragmatic aspects of the language. Such expertise will also help the teacher to teach the linguistic aspects of the language in context and avoid turning the *language* class into a *linguistics* class[6].

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The absence of graded teaching materials requires a teacher to be trained in or familiar with learner-oriented teaching strategies. A learner-oriented teaching strategy presupposes student-managed learning. The student rather than the teacher controls the learning process and is expected to develop skills that will enable him/her to know when and how to apply specific learning strategies. By contrast, teacher-oriented teaching presupposes teacher-managed learning, one in which he/she has full control of the teaching, the selection of the actual teaching material, and the strategies the students should adopt in acquiring the language. In such an orientation, there is little or no room for student input from their own experiences and creativity which may enhance the learning of the target language.

There is another learner-related drawback. A learner-oriented curriculum seeks a balance between what the teacher is able to provide and what can be supplemented by other sources such as textbooks. Textbooks contain materials which are graded and sequenced to suit the linguistic and cultural contexts. The absence of a textbook deprives the students of the option of previewing or reviewing material already covered. Needless to say, teaching from teacher-designed material (without a structured textbook) poses a major problem to students if local conditions are changed (i.e. teacher, class or school change). Without doubt, a teacher/class/school change will affect students regardless of the structure of the class, but students will be more affected in those cases in which his/her language learning background is characterized by a lack of a coherent and systematic structured teaching. This problem is by no means unique to African languages, but it is certainly one of the main concerns being addressed by scholars in the field who are committed to the development of new directions and priorities for African language instruction in the 1990s (Dwyer 1992).

Content reflects the goals for a particular lesson. Establishing goals allows the teacher to plan each lesson very carefully. For example, if the goal is to equip the students with the ability to exchange simple greetings and to master the cultural and social importance attached to greetings, the teacher would choose to focus only on the material that helps the student learn and retain the vocabulary items associated with the act of greeting another person. In addition, the content of the lesson will provide the contexts in which these words are used to establish the contextual meaning rather than the dictionary meaning. Students learning African languages are particularly frustrated when they

continued on page 4

The Teaching of African Languages

continued from page 3

seek word meanings from available dictionaries because there is no dictionary that can adequately meet their immediate needs.

Swahili, one of the more developed of the African languages, has many dictionaries; none, however, are suitable for elementary or intermediate students. This is partly due to the fact that dictionaries offer the semantic meanings of the words devoid of their pragmatic meanings. As a result, students fail to understand why the teacher does not accept their creative use of the words obtained from the dictionary. While the teacher evaluates the usage pragmatically, the student, on the other hand, is using the word based on its context-free dictionary meaning. The over-reliance on dictionaries in language learning should be discouraged at some stages of the language acquisition. Although dictionaries are useful tools in language classes, they are least needed at the elementary and intermediate stages. The selection of vocabulary items for these stages, should be learner-oriented and therefore context-specific. At advanced stages, when the student is more independent of the teacher, dictionaries are essential tools. The expectation is that the student will, at this stage, have mastered the skill of extending dictionary meaning to specific contexts in which a particular word is used. Thus, teaching material should not require the use of resources that are beyond the students' level. At the elementary and intermediate levels, texts should have a simple glossary reflecting the context in which the words are used. This is in keeping with goal-oriented teaching (Larsen-Freeman 1986) which aims to provide the learner with a manageable inventory of items that can be retained and exploited by the student who seeks to be independent and creative.

Contextual settings make the teaching and learning of any aspect of the grammar, or structure of a language much easier. The role of context is most useful in two situations: (1) where the teacher has not been formally trained in linguistics; (2) where a trained linguist and teacher know for a fact or assume that the students have never been introduced to the study of general linguistics or are not fully acquainted with the grammar of their own language.

2. CONTEXT

Because content and context are interdependent, what goes into the content of any language lesson bears out the desirable social and cultural contexts. The intended semantic/pragmatic meaning(s) largely depend on the selection of the lexical items (words and forms to be learnt) and the syntactic structure(s) preferred (e.g. the preferred order of word and other segments).

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Many teachers of African languages find it difficult to teach, for example, the active and passive voice to non-native speakers. There are two main reasons: (1) many students do not know this aspect of the English grammar; (2) there are significant differences in the syntactic structure of the active and passive sentences in some African languages compared to English. For example:

Active:
(a) John bought a book for Mary
(b) John bought Mary a book

Passive:
(a.1) A book was bought for Mary (by John)
(b.1) Mary was bought a book (by John)

Now compare with the corresponding Swahili sentence (c) whose meaning can be captured by either of the two active English sentences (a) and (b) above.

Active:
(c) Yohani a -li- m- nunu-li-a Maria kitabu
John he-past-him-buy- for-fv Mary book [fv=final vowel]
(a) "John bought a book for Mary"
(b) "John bought Mary a book"

In the translation of the Swahili sentence (c), students would provide the (a) rather than the (b) sentence. There is a tendency for students to assume that the same flexibility in the ordering of the objects in English applies to Swahili. This assumption is erroneously extended to the passive structure in which either the direct or the indirect object may be selected as the subject of the passive sentence. But as (d) and (e) below show, there are constraints in the Swahili passive sentences. Here, (d) but not (e) is the correct passive structure for (c) above.

Passive [pass = passive]

(d) Maria a- li- nunu-li- w- a kitabu (na Yohani)
Mary she-past-buy-for-pass-fv book (by John)
"Mary was bought a book (by John)"

(e) *Kitabu ki-li- nunu-li- w- a Maria na John
book it-past-buy- for-pass-fv Mary (by John)
"A book was bought for Mary (by John)"

The final example (e) is not acceptable because in Swahili (as is the case in many other Bantu languages) there is an accessibility hierarchy which places human objects higher than non-human objects and animate objects higher than inanimate objects. Consequently, in (d), priority is given to the human object *Maria* 'Mary' over the non-human object *kitabu* 'book'. This hierarchy holds also in the preferred order of the objects in (c). Notice that the preferred order is for *Mary* to precede *kitabu*. This preference poses problems to students and teachers with no linguistic background when they use the English translation in their attempt to understand the meaning of the Swahili sentence. Many students miss the fact that the interpretation of the active Swahili sentence takes the object immediately after the verb as the indirect object and the next one as the direct object.

... in Swahili (as is the case in many other Bantu languages) there is an accessibility hierarchy which places human objects higher than non-human objects and animate objects higher than inanimate objects. Consequently...priority is given to the human object *Maria* 'Mary' over the non-human object *kitabu* 'book'. ... This preference poses problems to students and teachers with no linguistic background when they use the English translation in their attempt to understand the meaning of the Swahili sentence.

By teaching the active/passive voice in context, rather than from isolated sentences (i.e. from a strictly linguistic structural base), the teacher can help the students to understand the accessibility hierarchy. Context establishes the roles of the participants in the text, that is who is doing what, to whom, and by what means.

Often the selection of which participant should be assigned which role may be influenced by the cultural power structure. In many cases, the active participant is either a leader, or an adult, or male. Thus the power structure may exhibit the following hierarchy: status <age <gender (where < = greater). Students should, therefore, be guided through learning strategies to extract from context the two interdependent hierarchies (linguistic and cultural). It is important to show the students how the context will affect the selection of a male or a female to be the active participant rather than a passive one. For example, contexts that are intended to express a positive role of a male participant will show a higher distribution of active sentences with the male participant as the subject. In those that are intended to express a negative role of the male participant, the distribution will favor the passive construction with the female participant as the subject of the passive sentence. Because the language structure reflects the power structure in the society, it is inevitable that teaching from context is a better way of handling certain linguistic structures and patterns. My favorite way of teaching the active and passive voice is through a story using figurines that represent the active and passive members with specific roles in a particular power structure. The assigned roles emphasize the cultural relationship between the participants. The use of these figurines provides the students with images that they can recall whenever they see or use these constructions.

3. METHODOLOGY

In the field of language instruction, in particular African language instruction, successful teachers are often those who do not take their students for granted but realize that each student is unique and has his/her own potential. A successful teacher is one who plans each lesson very carefully and recognizes that each class is different in content, goals and strategies. He/she ensures that students know when and how to apply specific learning strategies and how to extract from context both the linguistic and cultural aspects of the language. It requires much time and patience to cater to each student's needs, but it is important for the teacher to show that he/she is interested in each student's performance, progress, and success.

A successful teacher will be able to maintain a balance between competence and performance in the class. There is a tendency for teachers to emphasize those areas of language that are of great interest to them. Overemphasizing one area (e.g. grammar, culture, discourse) more than other areas may cause divisions in the class and also destroy the students' enthusiasm in the language. The teacher's main goal should be to create an atmosphere in the classroom which puts all students at ease and stimulates their interest. This requires careful lesson planning and flexibility in the teaching methodology.

Class preparation includes an outline of the areas to be covered, detailed notes on the subject matter and a list of activities which will be incorporated in the lesson. There should also be an indication of the point at which each activity should be introduced. Most importantly, the lesson plan should be flexible enough to allow changes without disrupting the general plan, goals and objectives specifically set for that lesson.

The lack of resources for African languages has for many years forced teachers of these languages to devote more time in preparing syllabi and lesson plans which are flexible enough to absorb periodic changes in the outside world. In the process of

continued on page 6

The Teaching of African Languages

continued from page 5

developing a lesson plan, a teacher is able to think through the step-by-step activities for each lesson and to develop alternative plans. It is important to have multiple plans for each lesson because unlike the teaching of other subjects, a successful language class depends on the general mood of the class. A good teacher should be able to sense the mood of the class as he/she enters the classroom and then decide on the most effective plan for that day. As Cook (1992) notes, knowing what is going on in the student's mind is the first step a teacher must take in order to achieve the expected results in the classroom. The mood of the class will dictate the type of materials to be taught, the sequence to be followed, and the activities in which the students should be engaged. For example, there is no point introducing new material to students who appear unfocused, tired, unmotivated and unenthusiastic[7]. An unfavorable learning mood such as this calls for a shift in the plans (e.g. group activities or self-esteem building exercises) rather than adhering to a teacher-controlled learning activity (e.g. introduction of new material). Group work for five or ten minutes will vitalize the students and, if this is followed by a brief review of past material, the classroom mood would change to allow the introduction of new material. Language learning requires that the learner remains alert and attentive at all times. This is only possible if the learner is in a learning mood. The teacher is the best judge of those moods and should be able to change an unfavorable learning mood to a favorable one through activities in his/her alternative lesson plans. Below is a suggested time schedule for a 50 minute class:

Speakers of African languages will acknowledge that a minimum exchange time for a simple greeting is five minutes. The small talk that accompanies a greeting exchange is intended to prepare the participants for a business mood. Important issues are not discussed, introduced, or ended abruptly. A bearer of good or bad news (e.g. a birth, wedding, death or other disaster) does not break the news until he/she feels that the greeting exchange has sufficiently prepared the recipient for the good or bad news. The same principles should be encouraged in an African language class.

Activity	duration (minutes)
familiarization stage	5
review of old material	10
new material	15
group practice	10
wrap up/reinforcement	10
Total	**50**

This schedule should be viewed as flexible and one that fits those days when the students' learning mood is at its best.

The *familiarization stage* involves the exchange of greetings, short conversations on the day's events such as the weather, or any aspect of social life that the teacher or students want to discuss. This approach models the general way in which native speakers of many African languages conduct their daily business. Speakers of African languages will acknowledge that a minimum exchange time for a simple greeting is five minutes. The small talk that accompanies a greeting exchange is intended to prepare the participants for a business mood. Important issues are not discussed, introduced, or ended abruptly. A bearer of good or bad news (e.g. a birth, wedding, death or other disaster) does not break the news until he/she feels that the greeting exchange has sufficiently prepared the recipient for the good or bad news. The same principles should be encouraged in an African language class. Each class should start with proper greetings and discussions that are general in nature (i.e. 'small talk'). It might be useful to encourage the students talk to each other on a subject of their choice or the topic of the day derived from important news or events.

The *review session* gives the teacher an opportunity to remind the students of the key material covered in the previous classes. The main aim is to bring students to a level at which they can comfortably make a meaningful connection or transition to the new material. The review can be done in the form of dialogue, sentence building, or by matching pairs of varied vocabulary items. Time should also be spent on reviewing homework (in full or partially) and students should be encouraged to ask questions about areas that are still unclear to them.

New material can be introduced through dialogue. The teacher's goal should be to build on what has already been acquired. In other words, there should be a smooth transition from the old material to the new material. Dialogues (and occasional drills) that emphasize specific grammatical features of the language should be a priority in the classroom. Generally students feel more confident and willing to be creative in the target language when they are comfortable with its grammar and are able to use their learning strategies to extract specific information from the contexts provided.

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The most productive activity following the introduction of new material is *group work*. In these groups, students are given the opportunity to practice the newly introduced material while the teacher visits each group to observe, correct and encourage the students as a group or individually. Small groups allow the teacher to reach out to students who would otherwise remain unnoticed in a large class.

The *wrap-up* session is equally important. It provides the class with a summary of the day's goals and objectives. A wrap-up session can be accomplished through teacher-student questions and answers or additional dialogue between the teacher and the students or between students selected by the teacher.

With or without textbooks, teachers must assign homework *regularly*. Surveys show that over 50% of the time, instructors do not give homework and rely more on evaluations through testing. Surveys also show that student attendance and motivation suffer when evaluation systems are predictable. Predictability can be avoided if the instructor is both systematic and spontaneous, especially in assigning group or individual evaluation tasks.

The class output can also be affected if the students can predict the teacher's daily format and procedure, that is, if the teacher does not vary the proposed schedule. Predictability can be avoided through varied activities. In some cases, student group work can be substituted with role playing. On those days when no new material is introduced, the teacher can assign 5-10 minute writing exercises which can be read out loud in class. Another good substitute is memory training which makes use of specific contexts selected by the teacher or the students. One student is asked to start by uttering a word/phrase while others build on it without changing the intended context. The goal is to build a story or a coherent text by adding new information in each turn taken by a student.

Rivers (1992) correctly observes that the teaching of languages involves more than just the classroom teacher. It involves those who are administratively and pedagogically responsible for curricula at college campuses. In collaboration with the classroom teacher, they set the teaching goals and objectives that suit their local conditions. In the teaching of LCTL languages, the goals and objectives are as varied as the languages themselves.

> Attaining cultural proficiency is particularly important in the learning of an African language because the culture is central in the semantic and pragmatic functions of the language. The preferred teaching methodology for an African language is, therefore, through its culture. The use of culturally authentic materials, such as songs, dances and artifacts, which reflect the culture of the speakers, is an important way of teaching the language through its culture (Seelye 1993). The objective is to help the students learn the target language in context in order to develop a non-ethnocentric view of the language, its culture and social values of the native speakers.

The African languages, a unique group in the LCTL group of languages[3], are a good example of languages for which the teaching goals and objectives vary from institution to institution. This is because these goals and objectives are not controlled by the teacher but by other local conditions. Not only do local conditions influence the administration of the African language at a local university or college, but they also determine which of the African languages should be taught and which students should not enroll in such classes. For example in an institution where local conditions favor the teaching of one of the major African languages (Swahili, Yoruba, Hausa, Wolof, Akan, etc), the instructor is usually a faculty member or a teaching assistant (under close supervision of or team-teaching with a faculty member). Linguistics and Anthropology majors are usually encouraged to enroll. Where the local conditions are semi-favorable, the instruction is supervised by a department or program with a language bias. In most cases, the least favorable situation prevails: the language class is independently structured and taught by a teaching assistant or an instructor who may or may not have a linguistic background or language teaching experience.

In these different situations, the methodology adopted will differ greatly. In the last situation, the teaching will be largely teacher-oriented, a method that is less demanding. If the instructor is a graduate student, his/her priority will not be the language class. It is unlikely that such an individual will have the incentive to develop teaching material or innovations geared towards strengthening the goals and objectives of the language class. Since the instructor considers himself/herself a transient, his or her main goals and objectives will, undoubtedly, be to fulfill the minimum requirements of the class: a 'passing grade' for students who require foreign language credit for their college degree. Consequently, the teaching and the learning process is less interactive. The teacher uses monologues (lecture format) and students have little or no opportunity to interact with the teacher or with each other. Students' self-esteem suffers greatly if they observe that the goals and objectives of the class will not necessarily enable them to attain proficiency in speaking, writing, and reading.

Where the local conditions are favorable, that is where there is institutional support and a faculty or staff member responsible for the language class, the goals and objectives are more explicit. In

continued on page 8

The Teaching of African Languages

continued from page 7

addition to the instructional goals, the teacher will show interest and make an effort to maintain the status of the language among the other languages taught at the institution (usually "Commonly Taught" languages). The teacher's main instructional goal will be to enable students to become proficient both in the language use and in the culture surrounding the target language.

Ideally, the structure of any language class should be learner-oriented, allowing dialogue and discouraging monologue. A learner-oriented structure enables the learner to: (1) learn and retain the material taught over a period of time, and (2) to develop language and cultural skills that are easily transferable. Attaining cultural proficiency is particularly important in the learning of an African language because the culture is central in the semantic and pragmatic functions of the language. The preferred teaching methodology for an African language is, therefore, through its culture. The use of culturally authentic materials, such as songs, dances and artifacts, which reflect the culture of the speakers, is an important way of teaching the language through its culture (Seelye 1993). The objective is to help the students learn the target language in context in order to develop a non-ethnocentric view of the language, its culture and social values of the native speakers.

To conclude, it is important to point out that learning a language is a task similar to that of building a house. It requires a good foundation, adequate building material, and a workable plan that is carefully followed. The interdependency between content, context and methodology in language teaching and language learning follows from these principles of craftsmanship.

Notes

1. In reference here is exposure to Western media. Many African countries are exposed to Western newspapers, catalog advertising, television (especially CNN), and video viewing (video rental is a growing business in many African countries).

2. LCTL (Less Commonly Taught Languages) is a category in which we find the 99% of the languages taught in many American universities and colleges. The remaining 1% includes French, German and Spanish, the category noted as CTL (Commonly Taught Languages).

3. Historically, foreign language learning has favored the 1% rather than the 99% of the languages now being taught in the United States. Consequently, the importance of a particular language was and still is reflected in the allocation of institutional and national resources as well as the status accorded to these languages in the school curriculum (e.g. being required for college credit).

4. The definition of 'local conditions' is broad and may include both administrative and pedagogical aspects of language instruction.

5. Revised teaching material is possible only if the same teacher is retained for a number of years. In many cases, the turnover of teachers of African languages is one or two years depending on the instructor's tenure, (usually 3-4 years, especially if they are graduate students).

6. An unpublished survey (Moshi 1991) shows a drop in language enrollment in those languages that are teacher-oriented and which emphasize the linguistic aspects of the language.

7. I call this the "Monday or Friday learning mood". Many students appear least motivated at the beginning of the week and at the end of the week. Three days of the week appear to be the most productive language learning period. My suggestion to teachers of African languages is not to introduce new material on Monday or Friday. These two days are more effectively used for material reinforcement and testing.

8. Based on the number of languages, the African language family is the largest in the world, followed by the South Asian languages group. The African language group consists of over thirty languages that are currently being taught in the United States or have been requested by students whose research interests require a reading knowledge of that language. Currently, there are about fifteen languages that are taught on a regular basis in American universities and colleges. These are categorized as group one of the priority languages (Wylie & Dwyer 1980, Dwyer 1992).

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